The Problem of the Puer Aeternus

Marie-Louise von Franz

The Latin term puer aeternus means "eternal youth" and, in mythology, refers to a god who remains forever young. Marie-Louise von Franz, a psychologist and student of Carl Jung, used the term to describe a man who reaches adulthood but remains mentally and emotionally stuck at the level of an adolescent.

> **"The title puer aeternus means eternal youth, but we also use it sometimes to indicate a certain type of young man who…remains too long in adolescent psychology." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

In The Problem of the Puer Aeternus, which is based on a series of lectures given at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich in 1959–1960, von Franz examines the characteristics of the puer aeternus and offers practical guidance for overcoming this stunting in one's development.

The Devouring Mother

A man who develops into a puer aeternus is typically exposed to a pathological pattern of mothering during childhood. The mother, driven by a mixture of love, anxiety, emotional neediness, and an unconscious fear of separation, hinders the development of her son's masculinity. She shields him from challenges and difficult experiences, discourages him from taking risks, and overindulges him. As a result, when he enters young adulthood, he lacks the confidence and courage needed to establish a life of his own.

> **"One sees in real life how mothers do everything they can to castrate their sons: keeping them at home and making women of them." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

This type of mother is a devouring mother because she metaphorically "devours" her son's masculine vitality.

> **"Masculine spontaneity is what the mother who intends to keep, or destroy, her son, instinctively fights…This feeling of vitality is typical in a healthy young person. It makes one feel alive and enterprising, and that is what the devouring mother hates most. She hates it in the son because that is the impulse of life which will lead him away from her, unconsciously, as it were." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**
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> **"…the mother who intends to devour her son begins when he is quite young, with her perpetual fussing care—putting cream on the sore place—telling him not to go with the other boys who are so brutal, and so on. When he comes home after having been beaten up, she says she will speak to the other boy's parents about the awful things their son does, instead of telling her own boy not to be such a coward but to hit back. So she turns him into a physical coward, and that forms a base for all the rest, for a coward has no foothold in life." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

The sons of devouring mothers fail to psychologically separate from their mother. These men continue to look to their mothers for reassurance, guidance, and approval, and this continued dependence keeps them stuck at an immature level of psychological development.

> **"…all those characteristics that are normal in a youth of seventeen or eighteen are continued into later life, coupled in most cases with too great a dependence on the mother." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

Lack of Staying Power

One of the main characteristics of the puer aeternus is a lack of persistence and discipline. He struggles to stick with a plan or course of action - a career, a field of study, a project, or a relationship - long enough to cultivate success or create something of value.

> **"It is a given fact the puer aeternus does not want to stick out a situation…the puer aeternus never quite touches the earth. He never quite commits himself to any mundane situation but just hovers over the earth." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

This lack of persistence and discipline is rooted in his pathological relationship with the mother. Because she did too much for him throughout childhood, he never learned how to persist through obstacles and difficulties on his own. When his homework became difficult, she finished it for him. When other boys bothered him, she solved the problem for him. When he faced a difficult situation at camp or in organized sports, she took him home. As a result, the puer aeternus enters adulthood expecting that life will provide him with satisfaction and success without effort or struggle on his part, just as his mother always provided for him.

Von Franz references a passage from Carl Jung's Aion which describes this lack of staying power.

> **"There is in him a desire to touch reality, to embrace the earth and fructify the field of the world. But he makes no more than a series of fitful starts, for his initiative as well as his staying power are crippled by the secret memory that the world and happiness may be had as a gift—from the mother." (Carl Jung, Aion)**

Everlasting Switching

The puer aeternus engages in what von Franz calls "everlasting switching." He chooses a career, project, or relationship, but when difficulties and obstacles arise, he concludes that he has chosen the wrong path and decides to follow a different one. This jumping from one plan and course of action to another continues indefinitely.

> **"Such people have great difficulty in finding the right kind of job, for whatever they find is never quite right or quite what they wanted. There is always "a hair in the soup." The woman also is never quite the right woman: she is nice as a girlfriend, but—. There is always a "but" which prevents marriage or any kind of definite commitment." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**
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> **"When he has to take something seriously, either in the outer or the inner world, he makes a few poor attempts and then impatiently gives up…That is why such people tell you suddenly that they have another plan, that this is not what they were looking for. And they always do it at the moment where things become difficult." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

Lives in the Realm of Fantasy

Because he never commits himself to one path long enough to build anything of value, the life of the puer aeternus tends to remain barren. He drifts through adulthood without establishing a successful career, developing skills in a hobby or creative pursuit, or forming lasting relationships and a family of his own. As a result, he finds solace in his fantasies. His present circumstances are unsatisfactory, but he imagines that one day he will meet the perfect woman, discover the perfect career, build a successful business, or achieve greatness in some creative endeavor.

> **"They cannot get into something meaningful but slowly overgrow the real personality so that the individual walks about in a cloud of fantasies, fantasies which in themselves are interesting and full of rich possibilities, full of unlived life. You feel that such a person has a tremendous wealth and capacity but there is no possibility of finding a means of realization." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

Lazy - Lives in a Sleepy Daze

While he tends to have big dreams for the future, on a day-to-day basis the puer aeternus does little to make them a reality. Instead, he wastes his time daydreaming, sleeping, loafing around, and getting drunk or high.

> **"…for instance, he gets up at 10:30 a.m., hangs around till lunch time with a cigarette in his mouth, giving way to his emotions and fantasies. In the afternoon he means to do some work but first goes out with friends, and the evening is spent in long discussion about the meaning of life. He then goes to bed at one, and the next day is a repetition of the one before, and in that way the capacity for life and the inner riches are wasted." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**
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> **"…he lives in a continual sleepy daze, and that too is a typical adolescent characteristic: the sleepy, undisciplined, long-legged youth who merely hangs around, his mind wandering indiscriminately, so that sometimes one feels inclined to pour a bucket of cold water over his head." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

Turns into a Cynical and Bitter Old Man

As the puer aeternus approaches middle age, he is faced with the realization that his fantasies are not becoming reality. While others have built careers, traveled the world, accumulated savings, raised families and developed skills, he has little to show for the decades of his adult life. This realization can give rise to a sustained depression that gradually transforms the dreamy and idealistic youth into a cynical and bitter older man. Von Franz describes this as an example of enantiodromia - the tendency for one extreme psychological attitude to eventually swing over into its opposite.

> **"After the puer loses the ecstatic, romantic élan of youth, there is danger of an enantiodromia into a completely cynical attitude toward women, life, work in general, and money. Many men suddenly fall into an attitude of disappointed cynicism. They lose all their ideals and romantic impulses and also, naturally, their creativeness, writing it all off as the fantasies of youth. They then become petty, earth-bound, small-minded people." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**
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> **"…such a man suddenly becomes a cynical, disappointed old man… He has neither belief nor interest in anything any longer. He is absolutely and thoroughly disillusioned and thereby loses all creativeness and élan vital." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

The Cure

Although the puer aeternus did not create the conditions that shaped his neurotic psychology, once he becomes aware of his situation, it is his responsibility to do something about it.

> **"You might ask what cure there is? If a man [is a puer aeternus] that is something which happened to him, he did not do that himself, but supposing he discovers the fact one day, what can he do about it?" (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

1. Separate from the Mother

The first step toward overcoming the puer aeternus psychology is to separate from his mother and establish healthy boundaries. If he still lives with her, he should move out and establish a life of his own. He should also reduce how often he visits or communicates with her, be more selective about how much of his personal life he shares with her, and make important life decisions on his own.

> **"I would say that everybody has to get free of the mother…If a man follows his pattern, namely, frees himself from his mother, then he is doing the right thing." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

Von Franz cautions, however, that in some cases a man may be so psychologically dependent on the mother that separating from her too abruptly could be destabilizing or even psychologically devastating. In such cases, the process of separation should be undertaken carefully and gradually.

> **"There are cases of motherbound young men where it is not advisable to try to detach them too much from their mother because they would die. You could say that they can only survive in that parasitic connection with the maternal tree. If you put them on the earth as an independent living system, a fruit of the tree, they cannot survive. They don't have the vitality to become an independent individual." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

2. Work

The puer aeternus should also commit himself to some form of disciplined work. This could be a job that helps him achieve financial independence, the cultivation of a skill, or a creative project. The important thing is that he works for a set number of hours each day over an extended period of time, no matter whether he feels like it or not. He needs to cultivate disciplined persistence and learn how to continue with a course of action even when he feels lazy, frustrated, or unmotivated.

> **"In Symbols of Transformation Jung spoke of one cure—work—and having said that he hesitated for a minute and thought, "Is it really as simple as all that? Is that just the one cure? Can I put it that way?" But work is the one disagreeable word which no puer aeternus likes to hear, and Jung came to the conclusion that it was the right answer...I remember him saying once to a puer aeternus type, "It does not matter what job you take. The point is that for once you do something thoroughly and conscientiously, whatever it is." This man insisted that if only he could find the right thing, then he would work, but that he could not find it. Jung's answer was, "Never mind, just take the next bit of earth you can find. Plow it and plant something in it. No matter whether it is business, or teaching, or anything else, give yourself for once to that field which is ahead of you."" (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**
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> **"My experience also has been that if a man pulls out of this kind of youthful neurosis, then it is through work…The puer aeternus has to learn to carry on with work he does not like, not only**

> **with the work where he is carried away by great enthusiasm, which is something that everybody can do…The work which is the cure for the puer aeternus is where he has to kick himself out of bed on a dreary morning and again and again take up the boring job—through sheer will power." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

Do Not Discard the Positive Youthful Qualities

It is also important that the puer aeternus preserve the positive qualities of his youthful psychology. The goal in overcoming this neurosis is not to become a "mature" adult who is banal and wholly absorbed in the mundane demands of reality. Rather, he should try to retain the idealism, sense of possibility, playfulness, and spiritual vitality that are the positive qualities associated with puer psychology.

> **"In general, the positive quality of such youths is a certain kind of spirituality which comes from a relatively close contact with the unconscious. Many have the charm of youth and the stirring quality of a drink of champagne. Pueri aeterni are generally very agreeable to talk to. They usually have interesting things to talk about and have an invigorating effect upon one. They do not like conventional situations; they ask deep questions and go straight for the truth. Usually they are searching for genuine religion, a search that is typical for people in their late teens." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "A man's maturity is to have regained the innocence of a child at play." It is this innocence that the puer aeternus should hold onto as he develops the maturity needed to adapt himself to the demands of life.

> **"That is the great problem, I think, in a nutshell; namely, how can one pull out of this fantasy life of youth and youthfulness without losing its value? How can one grow up without losing the feeling of totality and the feeling of creativeness and of being really alive, which one had in youth?...But, practically, this is something which is immensely subtle and difficult to accomplish." (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**

The Danger of Remaining too Long in Adolescent Psychology

The longer a man remains a puer aeternus, the more he wastes his life and risks psychological catastrophe. The psyche naturally presses toward maturity, and when a person continually avoids the tasks required of him - work, responsibility, commitment - the energy that should have gone into growth does not disappear. It accumulates in the unconscious and becomes destructive, and can lead to addictions, suicidal tendencies, psychosomatic illnesses, and other crippling symptoms.

> **"If in actual life you have to contend with such a problem, then you see how people refuse to grow and become mature and tackle the problem, and more and more a destructive unconscious piles up. Then you have to say, "For God's sake, do something, for the thing is growing against you and you will be hit over the head by it…The inner possibility of growth in a person is a dangerous thing because either you say yes to it and go ahead, or you are killed by it. There is no other choice. It is a destiny which has to be accepted."" (The Problem of the Puer Aeternus)**